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Autor: Dalsgaard, Inger H.
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“Going Round and Round with Old Gravity”: Technological Progress and Escape in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Inger H. Dalsgaard

Introduction

This reading of Thomas Pynchon’s epic fiction *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) revolves around the opening of Episode Six of “In the Zone,” the novel’s third part. The complete episode stretches from pages 359 to 371 in the standard Pan edition, but this article focuses on the “Rocket-raising” section at the beginning of that episode. The reading not only demonstrates how Pynchon criticizes mythic and historical revisions of linear and parabolic models of technological progress (both of which are described more fully below); it also suggests his ambivalent attitudes towards so-called “natural” and “vicious cycles” in history. The strongly figurative and prophetic use of history in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is reminiscent of the historical philosophy of the German writer Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), which was undergoing something of a revival during the turbulent years preceding the novel’s publication: *Gravity’s Rainbow* shows an affinity with the ghostly “prophet of doom,” whose disciples at that time were thought of, in the words of one critic, as “waiting for the fall of practically everything” (Hacker, back cover). In Pynchon’s novel we await the fall of the rocket, literally and metaphorically, keeping in mind that Spenglerian ideas about cultural decline and exhaustion can already be found in Pynchon’s early short story “Entropy” (1960).

Gravity’s Rainbow was written during the years of the Apollo lunar landing program, and the quest for an expensive rocket which will never be found rehearsed in the novel can be read as symbolizing and exposing a mistaken and delusive faith (often fostering escapist goals) exemplified by Project Apollo: the belief that technological progress moves in a linear direction towards an eternally-deferred climax, with technology itself endlessly improving mankind’s way of life. As Pynchon himself came to maturity

during the 1950s and early 1960s, much historical writing in the United States presumed a comparably confident teleology, with what might be called both Whig and Progressive variants, in spite of their differences, interpreting the nation's historical experience as a record of liberty's triumphant extension (cf. Gordon, Hexter, Hollinger, Megill, Novick, and Ross). By contrast, Oswald Spengler's post-World War One "best seller," *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Vol. 1, 1918; Vol. 2, 1922), translated as *The Decline of the West* (1926-1928), saw world history as a sequence of parabolas, or cycles (mimicking the natural cycles of the seasons or of human life) in which cultures were born and then flourished before, as civilizations, experiencing decline and inevitable extinction. In the wake of one civilization's fall, Spengler argued, a new culture came to life. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon is also concerned with the idea of natural patterns of growth, decline, and decay. However, Pynchon uses what he calls the "Rocket Cartel" (566) to raise the specter of ecologically-sound cycles being taken over, vampire-like, by malevolent and parasitic synthetic cycles – not so much diseased as un-dead – at the behest of profit-hungry transnational corporations organized into a pervasive yet intangible "System." Set in a nine-month period during which World War Two comes to an end, to be replaced by what Pynchon's narrator calls "war (peace?)" (283), the novel traces the maintenance, through the machinations of the Rocket Cartel, of a near-invisible war economy which persists even after the killing is supposed to have stopped.¹ Delivered via a mock-ritual of death and rebirth enacted by technology within a larger bureaucracy, which promises transformations but sustains the old order in a more pleasant guise, the United States, in Pynchon's reading, becomes "our new Deathkingdom" (722-723). Rather than new life growing from the decay of the old, as in Spengler's vision, Pynchon's twentieth century historical nightmare finds only a cancerous growth metastasizing inside the living.

The Rise and Fall of Tyrone Slothrop

The "Rocket-raising" section of *Gravity's Rainbow* counterpoises two movements which are prominent throughout the novel: on the one hand, the parabolic, or what might be called the "failed linear," movement; on the other, the circular, which, as we shall see, stands either as a natural evolution

¹ A closer study of connections between Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Spengler's theories is forthcoming in 1999: Inger H. Dalsgaard, "The Linking Feature: Degenerative Systems in Pynchon and Spengler," *Pynchon Notes: Journal of Pynchon Studies*.

of the parabolic or in opposition to the linear, prompting it to fall and thereby fail. One version of the parabolic movement in *Gravity's Rainbow* is represented by the remains of a rocket: rising up when launched, then falling (into a swamp) when gravity takes control of its direction, before finally being raised once again. A version of the recurring circular movement in the novel entails the incorporation of the singular parabolic event within a recurring mythic ritual, which then reenacts it, end to end like a sine-wave, in imitation of a prehistoric seasonal festival of resurrection, now to be called a "Rocket-raising" (361).

The scene begins when one of the leading characters, Lt. Tyrone Slothrop, himself resurfaces in the text after disappearing from view, temporally and spatially, following Episode Four of the novel (Weisenburger 176). During that episode, Slothrop, who thinks he may have witnessed the "Rocket-raising" "a while back," had gone underground at "Mittelwerke," a subterranean rocket factory built under Berg Kohnstein near Nordhausen in the Harz mountains, but had escaped from it (and from US Army machine fetishists) in a hot air balloon (332). By Episode Six he has come down to earth once again, somewhere near Berlin, some time in late July 1945. Having in his recent travels thus described a parabola, as though following his own rocket-like trajectory, Slothrop is about to take on one of his many incarnations in the novel: the part-Wagnerian figure, part-comic book character of "Raketemensch" or "Rocketman." With the aid of this new identity, Slothrop will then approach the Berlin suburb of Neubabelsberg, center of the German film industry, in search of some cannabis, which he has been told has been stashed at the site of the allied Potsdam conference then being held nearby. The novel's omniscient narrator anticipates the protagonist's transformation by referring to him initially as "Slothrop – or Rocketman, as he is soon to be known" (359). This "premature" reference to Rocketman is repeated twice (360) before the Raketemensch identity is actually created for Slothrop from a looted "stash of Wagnerian opera costumes" (365). As if confirming Slothrop's other rocket-like qualities, the wardrobe consists of a cape and a shiny helmet, which, once the horns are unscrewed, comes to look like "the nose assembly of the Rocket" (366), something to which, it so happens, Slothrop has recently found himself intimately linked, both at the Mittelwerke and through his discoveries concerning his own childhood connections to the sinister construction of a Rocket Cartel.

At this point in the novel, Slothrop is starting to think that his trip inside the "Venusberg" of the rocket mountain, Berg Kohnstein, has delivered him, like "Tannhäuser, the singing nincompoop," into "a sucking marshland of

sin" (364). Slothrop also seems to recall a "real" marshland, where, at some earlier point, he may also have met the Rocket-raisers. But the semantics of his experiences and memories of decay are multifaceted. At an initial level, the marsh or swamp he finds himself in as Episode Six opens is personal and self-inflicted. As with his later reflections on having been sucked into some international power game played out amidst the (second level) decaying remnants of Nazi Germany, Slothrop in this case feels he should have known better than to be "asshole enough to drink out of an ornamental pond in the Tiergarten" (359), an experience which leaves him "down in the cellar among fever-dreams" of the Rocket-raising marshland (a third level) and with a bad case of diarrhea. However, this semantic tessellation is only part of the action. For Slothrop had begun his personal descent into the mire (becoming more tightly linked to the rocket's genesis and moving closer to the quagmire simultaneously) having seen the two conjoined at the Mittelwerke, where the imprisoned workers, literally "Untermenschen," surrendered their lives in squalor and oppression in order to create rocket vehicles that embodied other people's dreams of escape and of the future: dreams symbolized by a Rocket City theme park that will replace the rocket production facility after the war. Moreover, while both his physical and mental condition become more chaotic, drawing him into a kind of swamp-like corruption, Slothrop also approaches the light, getting closer to revealing the existence and structure of some kind of technological bureaucracy through the submerged remains of a V-2 rocket or "Aggregat." Slothrop's own movements in the book thus come to embody a dual direction, dramatized and analyzed in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a whole: the free flight of technology (the Rocket), which promises release to a dreaming elite of engineers, and the murky pull of gravity (the swamp) which drags the preterite down.²

By this time Slothrop, whose combination of Rocketman identity and "marshland" location begins to dawn on him around the Rocket-raising section, has also become prone to fantasizing: "somewhere between the burning in his head and the burning in his asshole, if the two can be conveniently separated" (360). In the Mittelwerke-Rocket City metaphor, however, mind and body barely could be. For while Slothrop's bowels are subject to gravity and bring out the oozing swamp inside him, his head and mind are soon to be encased in the rocket-like "Rocketman" helmet. Slothrop will be handed this helmet along with a "fat Moroccan reefer," whose "changing shapes, depths,

² The themes of the preterite and gravity are well-developed in *Gravity's Rainbow* (e.g. pp. 167, 412, 590, 639, 672). A seminal reading of the journey from bog, marsh or Moss to the Moon in the novel is given in Carter 275-276.

[and] grades of color" it reflects: a reminder of the close links between technology and hallucination in the Rocket City (365-366).

The Rise and Fall of the Herero

Slothrop's feverish recollection brings him closer to Enzian, a black rocket engineer also represented in the Rocket City's Genesis story, who Slothrop thinks "may offer him a way out" (360). Enzian does so: not, however, by separating mud and mechanics but by uniting them (362). As far as he recalls, "unshaven, sweating, stinking Rocketman" met Enzian south of Berlin at a marsh, which emitted "a rotting swamp odor worse than Slothrop's own" (360). Enzian was there to dredge pieces of rocket from the bottom of the swamp with the help of fellow members of the "Schwarzkommando," the near-extinct Herero people, who had been incorporated by the Nazis into an all-black rocket contingent. Released from their defeated colonial masters' control, the Schwarzkommando are now in search of a mythic rocket, named either "00000" or "Schwarzgerät," while the occupied Zone swarms with Allied engineers and scientists (the so-called "T-forces") engaged in similar missions. The almost archaeological excavation work involved in retrieving the rocket from the mud which weighs it down reduces the Schwarzkommando to "Sumpfmenschen." The surviving Herero seem, in other words, to be losing the struggle for possession: not simply of the rocket but of their own identity – just as they have already lost their place within German colonial and Third Reich history (362).

Enzian laughs at this vision, but the exchange is not, perhaps, a laughing matter taken in the context of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a whole or of Pynchon's other novels, which explore the interchangeability of man and the mechanical in the modern world with obvious concern. The fact that rockets can absorb humans with technological interests or engineering aspirations is expressed literally through the figure of Gottfried, the young rocket enthusiast literally and suicidally incorporated into the 00000 at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. That machines may be endowed with human qualities, as are the mannequins "SHOCK" and "SHROUD" in *V.* (1963), while technologists themselves can become absorbed in, to the point of identification with, their work (as does Enzian in relation to the Rocket and its fate) is also substantiated by evidence presented in psychological and sociological studies, not to mention other fictional works.

What happens, however, when Pynchon's narration admits other factors, such as gravity and mud, into the man-machine equation? Where does the

swamp fit into a relationship between engineers and rockets which is at once erotic and violent, devotional, idealistic and paranoid? Unlike sex, force, submissiveness, and distrust (all of which in complex ways repeatedly inform and shape this relationship), the swamp or marshland in *Gravity's Rainbow* perhaps represents a distinct external factor interacting with and counterpointing man's relations with what Jacques Ellul has called "technique" (meaning not simply machines but those methods, values, and structures possessing machine-like qualities, such as bureaucracy).³ Like many other characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop and the Herero are more than mildly obsessed with certain aspects of their relationship with the rocket. But the invocation of dirt, mud, and shit or (when coupled with gravity) swamps, death, and diarrhea identify them as transitional figures located somewhere between the top and bottom of the sine-wave structure discussed above. Though both the novel's narrator and the dreams of certain of its characters suggest that the peaks might signify freedom and the troughs bondage, the simple distinctions between right and wrong, or good and bad, thereby implied are in fact illusory, not least because the associations may be reversed. A fear of, as much as the desire for, freedom may lead to authoritarianism, for example, while bondage may encourage liberatory revolution. There are good reasons, therefore, why reading Pynchon's fictions in terms of such dualities can be problematic. Yet even as he alerts us in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) to the fallacies that may result from the binary structuring of perception and to the "excluded middles" ranged between the simple divisions of "zeroes and ones" that may result, in his writing Pynchon also has to (or happens to) succumb to their heuristics. The illustrative potential of the parabola image here, regardless of how it is modified and questioned elsewhere in *Gravity's Rainbow*, enables it to exercise a crucial role in the novel.

The dual movement between what might be called, on the one hand, the Force of Gravity and, on the other, the Cult of Progress through Technology occurs elsewhere in the novel. At this juncture, however, it articulates a second theme having to do with mythic and historical perspectives in Pynchon. For the sort of gravitational attraction described here involves not only a

³ "Technique certainly began with the machine [and] without the machine the world of technique would not exist. But . . . at present technique is employed outside industrial life . . . and the machine represents only a small part . . . not even the most important aspect of technique; technique has taken over all of man's activities. . . . However, the machine represents the ideal toward which technique strives . . . technique transforms everything it touches into a machine. . . . Technique integrates the machine into society. It constructs the kind of world the machine needs. . . . It does in the domain of the abstract what the machine did in the domain of labor" (Ellul 3-5).

downward force thwarting the upward linear vector of technological aspiration (abstract dreams as well as physical escapes), but gravity here also signifies the necessity of conforming to a circular, or rather recycling, movement in time, a movement best expressed in the passages under consideration as mythic (though elsewhere it is also expressed ecologically [see, for example, 167, 412]). So that while rocket engineers mentioned in *Gravity's Rainbow* – either fictional, like the hapless Franz Pöckler, or real, like Wernher von Braun – seek to use their knowledge as a means of escape, both the rocket the Schwarzkommando have found (forced down from a potentially never-ending linear escape by the force of gravity) and the narrative surrounding it become part of a circular reenactment and resurrection of Herero history. As the rocket is raised from its muddy "grave" (361), it may remind the German people gathered there of their hero, von Braun, and of the way he, like the Schwarzkommando in their own way, seemed to have overcome "old Gravity" by dragging a rocket up and away. Yet the myth and ritual with which they surround this apparent escape also constitute a trap, which will force the rocket and its maker to return repeatedly to the start. Parodying the Freudian return of the repressed, Pynchon through the rocket dramatizes the return of the depressed.

Of course, mythic time may be thought of simply as part of a very long historical perspective. However, as Mircea Eliade explains in *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (1954), it also represents an alternative to traditional Western or positivist notions of history which emphasize the purely linear and chronological (Eliade 141-147). It may therefore make sense to think of mythic time as incorporating both the spatial and the temporal, which is what Pynchon's narrative does here, as the real movements of a rocket through space also have a symbolic place in both a German ritual and Herero beliefs concerning time. In terms of movement or chronology, whether perceived as linear or circular, space and time find a figurative expression at the center of the Rocket-raising section of *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which the temporal signifiers Spring and Winter parallel movements effected by the archetypal Scientist and an embodied Gravity. The conflict between, on the one hand, "Spring" or the "young scientist-surrogate" and, on the other, "deathwhite old Winter" or "old Gravity" is only a mock battle: its outcome is predetermined and the fight destined to be repeated annually (361). If Gravity appears as a "buffoon" who loses out to science, the "defeat" is only temporary. Gravity is like the mud against which the Schwarzkommando struggle in order to salvage the rocket they futilely hope will be unique and therefore singular, not circular. The strange floral towers

erected are not for launching the rocket and its scientist out of the cycle of life and death with a blast, but a Maypole, which the scientist will be “going round and round with old Gravity” (361). What we have here, in short, is a reduction of historical as well as technological linearity to mythic circularity, by way of the parabola: something with which these German folk apparently affiliate naturally, and which shares a logic with the work of their compatriot Oswald Spengler.

The Rise and Fall of Oswald Spengler

By 1945 Spengler himself was dead, while his now-unpopular prophecy of Western decline into Caesarism had already (if a little unjustly) been tainted by the actual advent of Nazism.⁴ By 1973, however, Spengler had come back into fashion, at least with the post-Beat generation to which Pynchon belonged (*Slow Learner* 11). Spengler’s visions of a powerful culture doomed to exhaustion and decline seemed fitting at the end of a decade of race riots and assassinations, intense generational conflict at home and a disastrous war abroad. As a harbinger of the defeated Nazi tyranny Pynchon describes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Spengler spoke to another nation at the apparent height of its powers but haunted by a specter of genocide and loss. Since then, Spengler’s own position as an intellectual preterite (marginalized by the establishment because his intuitive methods of research and categorization defied dominant, rational methods of historical study) has made of his work not only a potential route into radical politics but also a bridge to postmodern theory – both of which are currently finding favor with Pynchon scholars. In this sense, another way in which Spengler’s theories of cycles within history impinge on *Gravity’s Rainbow* is at a figurative, as much as a thematic, level.

Pynchon may have reveled in “somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline” a decade before he wrote *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and the novel may share with Spengler an interest in (but not a Nietzschean opinion of) the positions of the elite and the preterite. But what Pynchon found particularly interesting about Spengler’s vision of historical patterning were the inescapable cycles which he believed cultures repeated through time (*Slow Learner* 15). Spengler’s visual metaphor of the parabolic rise and fall (or growth,

⁴ Spengler’s final book, originally entitled *Germany in Danger*, was – as its title indicates – critical of the Nazis. In spite of the heavy pre-publication editing and re-naming Spengler felt compelled to carry out in light of Hitler’s election in 1933, the book was banned in Germany and Spengler viewed suspiciously by the National Socialist party. See Hughes 127-136.

flowering, and decay) of one culture after another through time – drawn up towards civilization by an establishmentarian elite then dragged down into corruption and chaos by masses worshipping one leader – is replicated in the visions of flight and repression that occur throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. Thus an engineer like Franz Pökler dreams of making an escape from the overwhelming bureaucracy and control to which he is subjected by the Rocket project sponsored by the Third Reich. Yet the rockets he produces can never completely make good an escape from gravity or technology itself. For even as the moon remains a goal for those dreaming of liberation, the rocket invariably reaches the top of its arc before starting to fall to earth again. The Earth presses and incorporates such fallen masses into itself and then, in the course of historical time, gravity transforms the resultant wastes into raw materials to be recycled.

To this extent, Pynchon's sense of a destiny-driven, passive cycle is very much congruent with Spengler's. But linear flight is illusory in more ways than one. In *Gravity's Rainbow* it is not simply that even a moon rocket is subject to the laws of gravity and the limits of technology, but that a natural cycle of death and rebirth has been hijacked by "Them" or "the System." Linearity (even in the form of the parabola) has been turned into a placebo with which the System manipulates engineers and others it needs. Imagining that pupils of the System are in effect on some kind of a "trip" which will end with a bloody crash, Franz Pökler recalls how a Rilke poem was written over the seats of the (interchangeable) students: "'Once only once. . . .' One of Their favorite slogans. No return, no salvation, no Cycle" (413). However, the "brilliant employee" of the System that teaches them recognized instead a cyclical image of synthesis (413). Dreams entertained by individual rocket engineers like Pökler of a house by the Sea of Tranquillity on the distant Moon, without a return ticket, are escapist (410-414, 723). The System has used them all too successfully in furthering its own structures, which, like the rocket, have a "life of their own" (209).

Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* also describes the Faustian specter of such synthesis-seekers. Capitalism and bureaucratic mind-sets grow transnational and ignore natural cycles of life and death. Their desire for profit creates imitations of life, which in reality are "death-transfigured" (166). The rocket and the System are not living but un-dead: they imitate life. As the passages surrounding the Rocket-raising suggest, folk-memory and mythic history keep wanting to reproduce stories of natural cycles of death and rebirth, yet thereby fail to realize that the Old King, the System, does not die naturally but lives on, un-dead, as a New King. Such a sinister reading does not see the

cyclical Rocket-raising narrative as curbing either technology's ability to "blast out of the cycle" or public faith in such potentials, as suggested above. Rather, it sees the cyclical narrative as in effect a "cover-up" of an unnatural or vicious "cycle": one which pretends to recycle but which has a linear life. Those we might call the "Synthesists" subscribe to a vision of perpetual, linear "progress" which should be unsustainable. Only the fact that the 00000 Rocket never completes its voyage in *Gravity's Rainbow* implies the possibility of linear success. The novel's perfect rocket is left permanently pending, or hanging, on the final page: perpetually approaching, perpetually offsetting its (and humanity's) fate.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* the Moon and America have become a "Death-kingdom": the realm of those totalitarian diseases brought over by figures like Wernher von Braun who sought to escape to the land of freedom but brought with them their technological death-trap (722-723). Von Braun's rocket designs were used to propel not just the Apollo lunar landing missions but also the nuclear missiles which kept the world in deadly suspense during the Cold War. One of the keys to Pynchon's "apocalyptic" prophecy in *Gravity's Rainbow*, indeed, is that ever-looming Doomsday: a conflagration which never happens but which might be engineered to simulate death should it be called for by the transnational corporate "System," whose only interest in the maintenance of ideas such as "nations" and "sides" lies in their role in enabling it to drain off the energy and resources necessary for its survival. Pynchon's enigmatic, pervasive, yet never-present "They" seek to control boom and bust and to engineer apparent parabolas so that destruction can become a resource or part of their plan. Paranoid characters in the novel realize that, rather than dispensing punishment or bringing catharsis at the end of an apocalyptic crash, They will use the "debris of the given" to fuel their synthesis: within this design, the End becomes not a way out but a way forward, with destruction a perverse sort of creation (413, 520-521). Insofar as the System uses but gives nothing back, the hope is that ultimately it "must crash, [and] is only buying time, which is artificial anyway" (412-413). That at least is the hope: that a real apocalypse may take place or that one may rebelliously be precipitated, if only to break the vampiric grip of a System which has suspended natural cycles of life and death.

All of which leads us back to the Rocket-raising and the Schwarzkommando, who seem to act out the parabolic action in which mechanical flights of fancy are bogged down by natural forces. Seeking the rocket religiously, and submitting to the logic of its system, they become undisciplined swamp people in the process; Enzian even tells Slothrop that their history is like that

of the falling Rocket. At the same time, however, the Schwarzkommando also embody the near-invisible dirt (dust, grease, oil, corrosion) which can ruin the flight of the rocket as technological system; they become the "excluded middle" capable of negating the "unnatural" cycle or "Destiny" which animated technology, rendering "what was alive . . . only an Aggregat again, an Aggregat of pieces of dead matter" (362). The Herero, then, are left with a choice: either to submit to the vicious cycles which support an unnaturally animated rocket – a bureaucracy of life – perpetually suspended; or to try to end them by embarking on a suicidal or apocalyptic mission. Ironically, therefore, apocalypse and death by suicide take on positive connotations. Within the Judaeo-Christian (originally Iranian) tradition, apocalypse is meant to spare the elite, but the Herero solution is intended not so much to enable a new life cycle to begin as to end the old (Eliade 124). As such their idea fulfills Spengler's prophetic vision of discrete historical cycles in which civilizations rise and fall.

Conclusion

Thomas Pynchon's ultimate fear is not of crashing missiles and apocalyptic conflagration. His worst nightmares, played out in *Gravity's Rainbow*, are either that "linear bureaucracies" will live on, leaving rockets in perpetual suspended animation above us; or that, if they ever seem to conclude their life cycle and fall, it will only be to spread their cancerous infection in a new life form, sustaining a corrupted cycle of life mutated into deadly growth. Given the years of the novel's composition, the Cold War alone could well account for Pynchon's first dystopian vision, while the growth of multinational corporations riding roughshod over both ecological concerns and human lives may well have informed Pynchon's second revision of Spenglerian world history as the millennium edges towards its close.

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